

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.

I remember, during my freshman year of college, talking to someone who lived down the hall. Somehow Shabbat came up, and I explained that I didn't do schoolwork (among other things) on Shabbat. Her response was: "oh, I could never do that, I have too much homework."

I don't remember how I responded out loud. But in my head, I definitely said: "oh yes, my professors certainly assign less homework than yours do."

Because, of course, that's not how Shabbat works. Even an ancient midrash, the Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, knows that. It asks: "is it really possible for a person to do all of their work in six days?" And answers: rather, you should rest AS IF your work is done,¹ אלא שבות כאילו מלאכתך עשויה.

But it's not *just* that we imagine that our work is done. So much of the Shabbat experience happens in this space of "כאילו," "as if." Because at its core, Shabbat is one great exercise in imagination.

The Torah doesn't actually tell us that much about what Shabbat is supposed to look like, but in the Mishnah, the earliest work of rabbinic law, we are given a list of 39 activities that are forbidden on Shabbat.² At first glance, it seems like just a long list of verbs; like how we might sometimes think of Shabbat: nothing is allowed!

But the list is actually quite well organized. Though it's not named explicitly, the 39 listed activities fall into four basic categories: the steps of baking bread, making clothing, writing a Torah scroll, and constructing a shelter.

¹ Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, 20:9

² Mishnah Shabbat 7:2

So, what do these tasks— baking bread, making clothing, writing a Torah scroll, and building shelter— have in common? In the eyes of the rabbis, they're the basic tasks of survival. Food, clothing, and shelter we would, of course, recognize as such; and given that the rabbis have devoted their lives to interpreting and attempting to live by the Torah, it is not surprising that the rabbis see Torah also as a staple of life; especially since Torah is elsewhere compared to water³ and is said to fill our bellies⁴.

Shabbat, then, is the time when we refrain from doing those subsistence labors. But, of course, we actually need to do all of those things to survive! So why would we refrain from doing them one day a week?! The rabbis also teach that saving a life supersedes the observance of Shabbat, so clearly we're meant to survive this weekly endeavor. But how are we to survive while neglecting everything we need to do to survive?

Before the rabbis give us this list of which kinds of work are forbidden on Shabbat, they spend several chapters of Mishnah describing the process of preparing for Shabbat. It's not that we're told to refrain from subsistence labor, but to do it in advance.

Now, I can tell you from personal experience, that this setup can lead to absolutely chaotic Friday afternoons. Between the stress of that preparation, of the cooking and cleaning and running around like a crazy person and making the third last-minute trip to the grocery store, there are certainly weeks where it doesn't seem worth it. So why do it?

Because I believe that what the rabbis are doing here is actually brilliant. We all know that on Friday evening at 6:34pm all of the work is not done. By its

³ BT Bava Kama, 17a

⁴ Psalms 40:9

nature, subsistence work is never done. We have to keep doing it, literally forever, if we're going to survive. But the rabbis encourage us to take one day each week to **pretend** that our work is done; to live *k'ilu*, as if we have no needs.

And so even if we have professors who assign lots of homework, even if the to-do list is always growing longer, even if our work is so important, even if things need repair, even if urgent errands are calling our names-- we are called upon to imagine those things away. That's not always easy, for so many reasons. But it is actually a rather playful way of engaging with the reality of our daily responsibilities in this world. We cannot escape those responsibilities, and I don't think the Torah wants us to! After all, in describing Shabbat, the 10 commandments tell us not just to "remember/observe Shabbat and keep it holy" but also "six days you shall work."⁵ And so we keep our responsibilities, but we engage in a weekly ritual of intense preparation so that we can imagine a different reality, one where our needs are already met.

In Jewish tradition, there are actually two times that all of our needs *were* met without us doing subsistence labor: In the Garden of Eden, where God provided plants for people to eat, and clothing and shelter were seemingly unnecessary; and while wandering in the desert, when God provided manna and ensured that the Israelites' clothing never wore out. And indeed, in Kiddush, we refer to Shabbat as "זכרון למעשה בראשית" "a recollection of creation," and "זכר ליציאת מצרים" "a recollection of the Exodus from Egypt." We imagine not only the past, but the future as well: we also call Shabbat "מעין עולם הבא," "a taste of the world to come," imagining a future Messianic age, a more perfect time of needlessness.

⁵ Exodus 20:9

And so through that pretending, through that playfulness, we actually touch something more real and durable than anything else-- the opportunity to be not human doings but human beings, and a connection not only with this moment but also with the Eternal.

In that way, Shabbat and Yom Kippur share an essence, and that's why I'm standing up here and talking to you about Shabbat on Yom Kippur, a Sunday night.

In our Torah reading for tomorrow morning, Yom Kippur is called "Shabbat Shabbaton..."⁶ and we don't actually know what that means. It might be doubled for emphasis, something like: "a Shabbat-y Shabbat or, per our machzor, "a Sabbath of complete rest." Or it might actually be possessive: ""The Shabbat of Your Shabbats."

But regardless of the translation of "Shabbat Shabbaton," a phrase that the Torah also uses elsewhere to refer to our regular weekly Shabbat, it is clear that Yom Kippur is intended to have something in common with Shabbat.

But this is also surprising: We are also told about Yom Kippur: "וְעָנִיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם," "you shall afflict yourselves,"⁷ which the rabbis interpret to mean refraining from eating, drinking, washing, anointing with oil, intimate relations, and wearing leather shoes.⁸ (*Halakhic tangent, because we get questions about this almost every year-- wearing a leather belt is allowed, it's just about footwear-- it actually begins as a prohibition on wearing shoes at all.*) And no matter how good you are at fasting, I really, really hope that this afflicting is not what your Shabbat is like. We'll also read in the haftarah tomorrow morning, "וְקָרָאתָ לַשַּׁבָּת עֲנוּגָה," "you shall call Shabbat a delight."⁹ And the rabbis are

⁶ Leviticus 16:31

⁷ Leviticus 16:31

⁸ Mishnah Yomah 8:1

⁹ Isaiah 58:13

unanimous in imagining that means eating delicious food, among other things. Yom Kippur is a lot of important things, and may even be full of meaning and joy, but a “delight” it is not.

So what is the Shabbat-y-ness that Yom Kippur and Shabbat share?

According to Rashi, they both have a “shvut,” a resting, a stopping. The Malbim explains this further: Shvut is stopping and pausing from the business that you are always doing. On Shabbat, that means stopping and pausing from your labors and the business that you do on weekdays. On Yom Kippur, that means stopping and pausing from the business of the body-- like eating and drinking and washing and physical intimacy-- that you do on other days.¹⁰

Both Shabbat and Yom Kippur are an opportunity to step off of the conveyor belt of the routines that propel us through our daily lives. Yom Kippur’s stopping is more comprehensive, a chance to not only reflect on the prior week, but the prior year. A chance to imagine new possibilities for what could be, not only in the coming week, but in the coming year.

And that is important and sacred and why, ultimately, we’re here together today.

But I want to invite all of us to take some of that pressure off of the 25 hours of Yom Kippur, and spread the love to the 52 Shabbatot we are blessed with each year.

Today, we attempt to ignore our bodies and instead focus on the spirit. But Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes not of Yom Kippur, but of Shabbat: “What is the Sabbath? Spirit in the form of time. With our bodies we belong to space; our spirit, our souls, soar to eternity, aspire to the holy. The Sabbath is an ascent to

¹⁰ Malbim on Lev. 16:31

the summit. It gives us the opportunity to sanctify time, to raise the good to the level of the holy, to behold the holy by abstaining from profanity.”¹¹

Heschel’s vision of Shabbat is a beautiful one, and sometimes, with a mix of effort and luck, that’s truly what our Shabbat can be. But before I go further, I actually want to pause and note that, like Yom Kippur actually, in some ways and sometimes, Shabbat can be really hard.

I used to have some hubris about Shabbat observance, which I’m a little bit ashamed of. I became Shabbat observant as a teen and young adult, with a supportive (if occasionally skeptical) family. I’ve worked in the Jewish community my entire adult life, where I definitely work on Shabbat (that’s a conversation for another time), but where my employer has never had a problem with me leaving early on Fridays or expected me to return emails on Saturdays. And so while sometimes Fridays were frenzied, Shabbat observance was actually pretty “easy.” I had a good rhythm, and a regular meaningful Shabbat practice that worked for me, and for Jeremy.

And then, within a few months of each other, we had a baby and a global pandemic, and lots of things turned upside down, including our Shabbat practice. Having guests was not a thing. It took a long time before we figured out how to do shul with Adina, who was too young to wear a mask when services started back up again. There were a lot of weeks when, by Friday night, we were just so exhausted and run down that Jeremy and I kind of collapsed at the Shabbat table in our pajamas, or in whatever we’d been wearing all day, where we ate pretty quickly before dragging ourselves to bed, hoping that Adina, and later Eliana,

¹¹ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 75

might sleep through the night. It was a far cry from Shabbat tables full of guests and nicer dishes and singing and laughter, from Shabbatot where we'd played board games with friends or spent hours reading books.

Since then, Shabbat has gotten easier and more joyful again. I still miss the board games, the reading, and the long naps that used to be part of my Shabbat, but we've figured out something that mostly works, at least for now.

But I share all of that because that experience humbled me a little bit. Shabbat really can be hard, and we're all on our own journeys, with different starting places and different obstacles.

It can be hard to create a meaningful Shabbat experience *for* kids, it can be hard to create a meaningful Shabbat experience *for yourself* when you're responsible for taking care of kids or others who need you, AND it can be so hard to celebrate Shabbat when you long for kids to share that experience with.

It can be hard to do Shabbat alone, or with others who want something different from the experience than you do.

It can be hard to do Shabbat when you're exhausted, when you're sick, when you're grieving, when you're away from home. And Shabbat happens 52 times a year, so at some point, it'll overlap with all of those things.

And so you might be tempted to say, "I don't know, Rabbi Borodin/Rose, this whole Shabbat thing seems like a lot of effort. Why bother?"

And I could give you a lot of answers to that question. I could tell you about the benefits of unplugging for most of our mental health. I could tell you about celebrating Shabbat in community-- whether that's here at Beth Shalom or around your dinner table-- as an antidote to the epidemic of loneliness that plagues our society. I could tell you about the way that ritual offers stability in a

rapidly-changing world. I could tell you about the renewed energy with which we can face life's challenges after we've had a chance to rest and restore ourselves. I could tell you about the power of disengaging from the world of commerce and acquisition, about the power of being instead of doing.

But here is my actual answer: it's because, from the very first chapters of the Torah, it is clear that Shabbat--rest-- is ours. As human beings, created in the image of the Divine who rested on the seventh day, it is our birthright. Not because we "got enough done" this week to earn it. Not because we'll be able to perform better or produce more if we are rested. But because to be human is to deserve Shabbat, to be given Shabbat as a sacred gift.

Our world doesn't often grant that gift to us easily. We often have to fight tooth and nail-- against work schedules, against a society whose days don't begin at sunset, against our own impulses, against grind culture, against the pull of the routine and the mundane.

And so I invite us, each of us, all of us, to imagine a concrete way we might enhance our Shabbat practice this year-- even though it's not always easy. Each of us has different past experiences and present Shabbat practices, and so what that might look like, what each of us might do to bring greater *kedushah*, greater sanctity, and greater *oneg*, greater delight, to our Shabbatot, will be different. Maybe it will look like lighting candles as Shabbat begins. Maybe it will look like making some time for Torah, for reading a Jewish book, for learning, on Shabbat afternoon. Maybe it will look like inviting guests for a Shabbat meal more often. Or learning to make challah. Or preparing your food in advance and refraining from cooking on Shabbat itself.

Maybe it will look like going for a walk with a friend. Or an uninterrupted conversation with a spouse. Maybe it will look like leaving your phone off for 25 hours. Or wearing special clothing. Or eating especially delicious food. Maybe it will look like welcoming the day with kiddush. Or bidding Shabbat farewell with havdalah. If you're not sure where to begin, or are looking for continued learning and fellow travelers on this journey, please join us for the study and singing and schmoozing opportunities listed as part of our Shabbat Initiatives on page 20 of the High Holiday Handout. If you like a little bit of kitsch, grab a "cell phone sleeping bag" [hold it up] on your way out to help both you and your device rest and recharge on Shabbat.

But however you choose to connect, on this Shabbat Shabbaton-- on this most Shabbat-y of Shabbats, where we take our biggest step back, our biggest pause, our grandest day of imagining who we could be and how our world could be-- on this Shabbat Shabbaton I urge all of us to commit to claiming the gift of Shabbat that is waiting for us. Because the Torah tells us that the divine spark inside of us needs and deserves rest and delight and renewal and imagination.

L'shanah tovah teichateimu-- may we all be sealed for a good year!